

GLOBAL

Kring voor Internationale betrekkingen



Migration

Volume 20 No. 1

January 2016

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www.kib.be

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Preface

The United Nations defines a refugee as someone who has reason to fear persecution because of his race, religion, political opinion, social group or nationality. Refugees have the right to seek and receive asylum in any other country. In Belgium for instance, one is given the official refugee status after it is proven that one can no longer live in his or her own country because of the previously mentioned reasons. As long as this official status is not attributed, and the refugee has started the asylum procedure, one is considered an asylum seeker. There is a prohibition on returning an (acknowledged) refugee to a country where his or her life or safety is in danger. Curiously, people have the right to be in a safe country, however they have not the right to get here. Here arises the case that refugees are illegal in the act of crossing the border but their stay becomes temporarily legal as soon as they have crossed it. This results in border control to keep refugees out, but the providing of services to them once they manage to get in.

One of the most famous political philosophers of the twentieth century, John Rawls, assumed that justice was to be organized within the nation state. Global justice seemed a non-issue for him. Rawls saw migration merely as a small phenomenon to be fitted in a theory of justice within the nation state. However, nowadays migration cannot be seen as an incidental thing but due to problems in Syria, Iraq and Yemen as well as in North Africa as one of the most pressing problems, one that has impact on nearly every society. Political theorists are waiting for the new 'Rawls' of the twenty-first century whom will equip us to talk about questions of global justice, and in which migration will be a key issue.

One can ask, however, whether such a new figure might not be found, distributed, over a range of voices who could lead the way to such a new perspective on global justice. To hear them together might result in something more than their independent views. This issue is an attempt to gather a number of these interesting voices to talk about migration and hope to help you to hear a herald of such a global justice.

Historical Reflections on the 2015 Refugee Crisis

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From a historical perspective, the current refugee crisis in Europe is not entirely unprecedented. In this article, which is an authorized transcript of a KU Leuven Metaforum lecture, I will first make some observations on migration and try to answer the question to what extent the current wave today is exceptional. Secondly, I will reflect on our societal reaction towards this migration and examine our expressed solidarity. Thirdly, I will compare the national and the European levels. Finally, I will draw some lessons that can be learned from the past.

Migration

I must say that, as a historian, I have experienced a great deal of déjà vu over the past weeks and months. Indeed, many images were very familiar to me. The Syrian migrants we see today in the Hungarian Pusztas reminded me of Hungarian refugees in the same landscape, escaping the Hungarian Uprising of 1956.

The boat refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea are reminiscent of the one million Vietnamese boat people who escaped their country after the fall of Saigon and the Communist takeover in 1975. The provisional shelters we see all over Europe are quite similar to the shelters installed across Europe for Jewish refugees who fled from Nazi Germany.

Even the current political reactions are somewhat similar. At an EU summit in September 2015, politicians agreed to spread 120,000 refugees across Europe. This plan was refuted later on by some Eastern European member states. A few decades ago, in 1938 in Evian,³² states discussed the problem of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. This also ended in failure: every state insisted on unfeasible conditions and eventually no one wanted to take in refugees. As a consequence the Evian conference was a huge victory for Hitler. The story about what happened in Evian is little known, because it is too embarrassing for our collective memory. Will this also happen in a few years regarding our reaction to refugees in 2015?

All preceding examples point out that as a historian, I am experiencing a déjà vu. Some people suggest that the current wave of refugees is bigger than any previous. This is not true. Certainly some past instances were smaller, such as the wave of Jews that fled from the Third Reich to Western Europe or the Hungarians that emigrated in 1956. However, during the Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s, far more people left their countries and became refugees.

During the First World War, one million Belgians escaped to the Netherlands, which at that time had a population of six million people and accordingly hosted one Belgian refugee for every six Dutch inhabitants. Based on data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, back then there were over four million displaced persons and 600,000 to 800,000 refugees in Western Europe, and this is an underestimation.

I will not go into detail, but just want to make my point clear: the world has faced similar, even larger refugee crises. Today's numbers are considerable, and it is difficult to predict the future, but the current crisis is not exceptional.

Critics will raise the objection that this crisis is different and that the immigration of Muslim refugees poses a bigger threat. They repeat that Belgian refugees in 1914-18 did not stay forever in the Netherlands and were closer to the local population: they shared the same language and had a similar culture. Muslims, in contrast, are considered to be completely different. They – I quote – import fundamentalism, do not share our values, and want to introduce Sharia law. Paul Scheffer, for instance, argues that Muslim migrants cannot integrate in our society and that their presence has laid bare the bankruptcy of the multicultural society.

Other scholars, however, have a different view. Leo Lucassen, for instance, compared the current fear of Muslims to the perception of other migrant groups in the past and argues that at some point in history all migrants were seen as threats, and that there is little difference between the perception of Jews in the interwar period, or Italians and Germans in the 19th century with the perception of Muslims today. Migrants are always seen as incompatible.

Society

Whereas I see many similarities with the past regarding migration itself, I notice plenty of differences concerning the societal reaction towards the migration.

In the second half of the 20th century, large segments of society rallied behind a foreign cause, for instance for Hungary in 1956, for Vietnam in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, for Anti-Apartheid from the 1950s onwards and especially after 1976, and for Poland in the 1980s. However, crises in the Muslim world have not had such a mobilizing effect. Palestine has never created such campaigns. The humanitarian campaign for Syria in 2013 only yielded 3.2 million euros. This is much less than other campaigns: we raised over 54 million euros

for the victims of the tsunami in 2004, or over 25 million euros after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. It is clear that aid for the humanitarian situation in Syria is a less popular cause than natural disasters. We are less concerned with Islam.

The same goes for migrants. Hand in Hand demonstrations on 22 March 1992 and 27 March 1994, in response to the rise of the extreme-right party Vlaams Blok, brought more than 100,000 to the streets. The petition Objektief 479.917 against racism collected more than one million signatures. Later, in 2006, a whole series of music concerts advocating tolerance were held on 1 October – hence its name 0110. The solidarity march for refugees on 27 September 2015, however, had only 15,000 participants and has not been repeated. Just ten days later, on 7 October, a trade union march against the Belgian government's rigid social policy drew 80 to 100,000 participants.

Several elements account for this. First, we do not identify with Syria, at least not to the extent we did with other examples. Concerning Syria, there is no Cold War framework, which explained the solidarity with Hungarians or Poles in the past. We also do not have a postcolonial or – in the case of Germany – a post WWII guilt complex, that is partly at the base of our aid to the Third World.

Secondly, our society has changed since the second half of the 20th century, i.e. the era of the greatest solidarity campaigns. Since the 1980s neo-liberalism has contributed to more individualization and secularization. Since 2008 we have faced a worldwide economic and financial crisis, which leads to fear and impedes solidarity.

Europe

This brings me to a third point of comparison, namely Europe. A striking feature of the societal attitude in a European context is the fact that we only seem to look at events from a national angle. Newly arrived refugees in the Netherlands were until recently concentrated in Ter Apel, a village in the north of the country. However, very few Belgians were aware of this. It seems that we are only informed about the Belgian situation and that we are far less aware of the developments in our neighboring countries and in other European member states.

It is indeed stunning how the refugee crisis is dealt with in a merely national framework. Italy, for in-

stance, has been facing boat refugees for several years. After a first accident on Italian waters in October 2013, the EU provided 1.8 million euros to Mare Nostrum, a rescue program for refugees on the Mediterranean Sea. Only a year later, the EU denied further requests for support, and the operation was stopped. The death rate on the Mediterranean has increased tenfold ever since. Even after two major shipwreck disasters, which together killed more than a 1,000 migrants within the span of a week in April 2015, Europe still considers this an exclusively Italian problem.

We also turned our back on Greece, the poorest EU member state, which in August suddenly saw a rise of boat refugees arriving from Turkey. Again, we viewed this as a local problem. It is only now, since September, after refugees reached our country, that we consider the crisis as European.

Once more, we react only on a national level and try to skirt our responsibility. We now increasingly blame Eastern Europe for doing too little. I do not wish to defend the Eastern European standpoint, but I have severe problems with our attitude towards their refusal to provide adequate aid. First of all, we want to skirt our responsibility once again. Secondly, we show little awareness for the Eastern European situation. Eastern Europe is poorer than other parts of Europe, especially the Northwest. This has much to do with their communist past between 1945 and 1989. The Eastern European member states therefore perceive themselves as victims of the 20th century and they do not identify with the crisis we are facing in the Middle East. Moreover, these member states have much less experience with migration: they did not recruit guest workers and were historically less appealing for refugees. This led to these countries being very 'white'. In Poland, for example, 98% of the inhabitants are European and there are very few ethnic minorities. Last but not least, these countries have less democratic tradition and have strong populist and extreme right politicians. The Hungarian Prime minister Victor Orban is the best known example, but Marian Kotleba, since November 2013 the Governor of the Slovakian region of Banská Bystrica, or Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Polish ruling party Law and Justice (PiS) can also be mentioned in this context.

Again, I do not want to defend the Eastern European standpoint. Yet, I do not think that we should point fingers. It would be a mistake to make demands on

them, to require them to share the burden when there is immense political or societal opposition in these countries. This will only create new rifts, more euroscepticism, new misunderstandings, greater frustrations and problems. Instead of correlating refugee numbers to population, we should look at living standards. Instead of proclaiming what others ought to do, we should look in the mirror.

Lessons from the past

So, I come to my last point: what lessons can we draw from the past? First of all: refugees generally stay after two years. The war in Syria will probably last for some more years, so it is fair to assume that most of the refugees will settle in our country. We therefore need to focus on the future. In order to stimulate integration, we should spread refugees over the country rather than concentrating them in certain cities. We should look at these new migrants as an opportunity for our economy and not as a threat for our welfare. And we need to increase the dialogue with these newcomers instead of fueling polarization and radicalization. We should support a moderate Islam instead of claiming that we are morally superior. So rather than harassing migrants with our values regarding animal rights and the ban on religious slaughtering, we should find a way of living together in a way that welcomes differences. The second lesson to learn from history is that new violence leads to new refugees. If we want to stop the flows, we have to restore the peace and stop selling weapons. The support from Ronald Reagan to the Mujahedeen in the Soviet-Afghan war paved the way for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s. MEP Guy Verhofstadt's campaign of selling weapons to the Syrian rebellions has not solved the conflict. Still, even today some politicians suggest we sell arms to the Kurds. This will create new conflicts: the Kurds have their own agenda, which in fact clashes with the geopolitics of NATO member states.

The third conclusion is that these examples demonstrate that we are very involved in this conflict and that we should acknowledge our own responsibility. From a historical perspective, our role is even greater. Europe drew the state borders in the Middle East. It deliberately divided people in order to easily rule them, and also made conflicting promises to Jews and Arabs. Nowadays, we celebrate imperialist heroes such as Lawrence of Arabia without ack-

nowledging the ambiguous role they played. This is remote past, one may think, but Europe has kept its double standard ever since. It explicitly allies with Israel, a country that creates immense frustration in the region and has itself utilized a great deal of violence – think of the Gaza war in 2014. Europe is also an unconditional ally of Saudi Arabia, an uncontested violator of human rights. Simultaneously, human rights are one of the major principles in European foreign policy and foreign intervention elsewhere.

Last but not least, we should not forget that many immigrants not only desire to escape violence and war, but also want to build a better future. Europe, or the Western world, is simply richer than many other parts of the world. Importantly, we built our wealth largely by exploiting the rest of the world, by taking resources for our industrial development and flooding markets with our cheaper products from the 19th century onwards. As a historian, speaking from the *longue durée*, I would say that we are now reaping what we have sown.

Further reading:

<http://www.kuleuven.be/metaforum/page.php?LAN=N&FILE=subject&ID=583&PAGE=1#-vluchtelingencrisis>

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Leo Lucassen, *The Immigrant Threat. The Integration of Old and New Migrants in Western Europe since 1850* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005)

Anne Morelli (ed.), *Geschiedenis van het eigen volk : de vreemdeling in België van de prehistorie tot nu* (Leuven: Kritak, 1993)

Herman Obdeijn en Marlou Schrover, *Komen en gaan: immigratie en emigratie in Nederland vanaf 1550* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008)

Paul Scheffer, *Het land van aankomst* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2007)

“The world has faced similar, even larger refugee crises.”



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